

# Issues:

## *The* **S** *eventh-day Adventist Church* &

# Certain Private Organizations

**“T**o help clarify the church’s relationship to certain private organizations, the North American Division commissioned a study. The following is an abbreviated and adapted version of the book, *Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Certain Private Ministries* (available from your local Adventist Book Center).”

*—Authorized by the Officers and Union Presidents of the North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.*

From their very beginnings Seventh-day Adventists have considered themselves to be a divinely called movement, raised up to proclaim the good news of Christ's second coming and to tell the world how to get ready for that glorious event.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church pursues its mission in general through an organized structure of churches, local conferences, union conferences, divisions, and the General Conference. Incorporated into these entities are various church-sponsored institutions and ministries dealing with areas such as education, publishing, health care, and broadcast media.

### **Supporting Ministries**

In addition, a number of "private," "independent," "supporting" ministries have arisen from time to time whose purpose is to assist in fulfilling the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church but achieve this by operating outside the regular denominational structure.

The denomination has been richly blessed by most of these private ministries. They accomplish tasks that the organized church cannot do because of financial and personnel limitations. Most of these have worked in harmony with the official organization, usually having denominational leaders or lay members on their board of directors. The church is grateful to the committed men and women who give so unselfishly of their time and means to operate these private ministries.

### **Private Organizations**

In a few cases private organizations, however, have worked at cross-purposes

with the denomination, have become destructively critical of the leadership of the church, have undermined the confidence of members in the organized body, and have drained away resources that could have been used in accomplishing the mission of the church, thus crippling the evangelistic outreach of the church. Such behavior presents a serious challenge to the spiritual health of the church body.

Denominational leaders have spent much time in prayer, study, and repeated in depth discussions with the leaders of Hope International, Hartland Institute, Prophecy Countdown, Steps to Life church in Wichita, Kansas, Rolling Hills congregation in Rolling Hills, Florida, and Good News Unlimited. It has become apparent to the church that these private organizations have displayed an unwillingness to operate in harmony with denominational procedures and protocol. This has been evidenced by the materials they produce and the verbal presentations they make.

In view of this situation, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has a responsibility to make clear its relationship to these organizations. In 1980 the church examined and then rejected the rising dissident views relative to the sanctuary and to prophetic interpretation. Just as the church continues to disassociate itself from the Good News Unlimited organization, so it must continue to express its grave concerns regarding groups that undermine either the doctrine or structure of the church.

Following the model of Acts 15, church leaders must alert church members to such dissidents who either cause dissension or undermine our central beliefs.



However, questions regarding individual church membership are processed by the local congregation and are not within the purview of levels of church governance above the local church.

The North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists feels it necessary to respond to this serious challenge with this careful, reasoned document. This document examines several private organizations and shows how their divisive activities are detrimental to and out of harmony with God's desire and plan for unifying His established church.

This information is not presented in a spirit of combativeness or hostility. The denomination holds no ill will toward the leaders or followers of these private organizations. Church leadership would be happy to see these private organizations join with them and use their energy and influence to assist the church in fulfilling its mission, as most supporting ministries have done and are doing.

This document has been prepared reluctantly and only because the church senses a danger to the spiritual life of its members and to the resources needed to maintain the harmony and unity of the church. If members lose confidence in the church and its leaders, they may well become discouraged and drop out—possibly to their eternal loss. If members become disillusioned with God's church, they may well withdraw both personal commitment and financial support, with the result that the church will be weakened in its attempts to complete its mission.

So the church must act to protect itself and its members. But it acts out of love and concern, not out of malice. The

church does not attempt to dictate the beliefs or work of these private organizations. It only asks for the courtesy and charity that any genuine Christian would afford fellow members.

### **Hope International/Hartland Institute**

Hope International, a private organization located in Eatonville, Washington, was begun by a group of laypersons. This group later invited Ron Spear, a retired Seventh-day Adventist minister, to join them. Hope International has been a source of some conflict with local congregations, not only in the Washington Conference, where its headquarters are located, but also in various places throughout the world field. Here the issues generally revolve around control of the church boards and what will be presented from the pulpit and in Sabbath school classes. Hope International also holds a series of camp meetings, as well as other public meetings throughout the year. These often compete with conference camp meetings and other services held by the church. These meetings provide an opportunity for Hope International to expose Seventh-day Adventist members to its particular message.

The major impact of Hope International, however, comes through a monthly journal, *Our Firm Foundation*, which is sent to a large number of denominational workers and leading lay members, many—if not most—of them receiving it on a complimentary basis. The journal is edited by Ron Spear and is made up largely of reprints from Ellen White material and articles by those associated with Hope International.

Hartland Institute is a private college



in Rapidan, Virginia. While the college was once well regarded by church leadership, its president, Colin Standish, has become increasingly critical of denominational leadership and practices. He has aligned himself with Ron Spear of Hope International and has become a frequent contributor to *Our Firm Foundation*.

Both Hope International and Hartland Institute are what might be called "reform ministries" rather than "outreach ministries." Such ministries are needed. The church is continually in need of reform. But "reformers" sometimes become obsessed with one or a few points that have paramount importance to them. If the church as a whole does not accept the reformers' particular message, the reformers may tend to see this rejection as a sign of insensitivity to the leadings of the Spirit—which in their opinion finally leads to apostasy.

The beginnings of this type of thinking may be noted in the statement of mission that first appeared in volume 3 of *Our Firm Foundation*:

"Hope International is a special ministry intended to assist in the God-given work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We believe this Remnant Church of Bible prophecy has been brought into existence by the calling of the Lord, and we look for its final triumph in purity at the second coming of Christ. That the church does not now perfectly reflect the will of our Lord is cause for sorrow, but not for discouragement. The Word of God stands pledged that all within her borders will be sifted and tried, and though the greater portion will fail the test, there will yet remain a remnant to honor the

Lord by their obedience to all His commands. Therefore, Hope International urges upon all the duty of supporting the Seventh-day Adventist Church in every way possible, *insofar as is consistent with the principles of the government of God and the leading of His Holy Spirit upon the heart.*"<sup>2</sup>

Thus at an early stage on the journal revealed a perspective that loyalty to God—as those associated with Hope International understand it—might force members to withdraw support from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The foundation was laid for a separatist movement or, at least, a smaller and "purer" church within the larger organization. This concept was here present only in embryonic form, but, as will be seen, it swiftly became full-grown.

### Charges of Heresy in the Church

While the differences that Hope International and Hartland Institute have with the church extend to certain practices, these differences are grounded in theology. To understand the pathway that led these once-loyal members into disaffection, it will be helpful to examine some articles from *Our Firm Foundation*.

Especially relevant is a 1991 article entitled "Heresies Will Come In,"<sup>3</sup> written by Ralph Larson, a retired Seventh-day Adventist pastor and Bible teacher. Larson, who spent his professional life in the employ of the church, has become increasingly critical of it. He seems to function as the "resident theologian" for Hope International.

Larson begins by noting that Seventh-day Adventist pioneers established a firm "platform of truth" from their earnest



Bible study. He maintains that this platform stood pretty well unshaken until the 1950s, "when the Calvinist theologian Walter Martin succeeded in winning from some of our leaders a concession regarding the humanity of Jesus." This concession (the first heresy, according to Larson) was that "our Lord had come to this earth in the human nature of the unfallen Adam," rather than our fallen nature, and this new teaching was propagated in the book *Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1957). "The heresies, as had been predicted," according to Larson, "began their steady march into our church."

The second heresy, wrote Larson, was "the doctrine of original sin, defined as inherited guilt." He then lists what he considered three more heresies:

"The third heresy that followed the first two into our church was a perversion of our historic doctrine of righteousness by faith (right doing by means of power received from God) into satanic doctrine of unrighteousness by presumption (wrong doing with the expectation of getting by with it)."

"The fourth heresy that followed the first three into our church was a denial of our sanctuary doctrine. . . . As was reported in our first article regarding the great Adventist apostasy, a survey conducted in the largest North American conference revealed that a substantial percentage of the ministers in that conference are now rejecting our sanctuary doctrine."

"The fifth heresy that follows in the chain-reaction is rejection of the Spirit of Prophecy. . . . With five major planks gone, how long can the struc-

ture stand, and which doctrine will be the next to be torn out and replaced by a false doctrine of Calvinism? *It might be the Sabbath doctrine.*"

Larson thus charges that heresy and apostasy have come into the church, that many Seventh-day Adventist ministers have accepted and preach false doctrine, and that "most of our administrators seem to be looking on either indifferently or benignly." Thus, "heresy follows heresy in a steady march into the church . . . in the great Adventist apostasy." Wrote Larson, "This has, of course, created division, because not all of our members have been willing to accept these changes and take part in this apostasy. And who is being charged with the responsibility of having created the division? Those who are clinging to our pure historic faith. . . . Remember, it is the heresies that separate, not the truth."

It is not the purpose of this statement to provide a theological rebuttal to the views held by members of Hope International. The issues of the conflict over the nature of Christ and righteousness by faith are not nearly as straightforward as adherents to Hope International would have them appear. Both Scripture and Ellen White contain statements that seem to support varying viewpoints, and these must be held in tension with each other. They provide opportunity for a lifetime of study and prayerful meditation, but not room for dogmatism. (For further study see Norman Gulley, "Model or Substitute? Does It Matter How We See Jesus?" *Adventist Review*, Jan. 18, 25; Feb. 1, 8, 15, 22, 1990; and "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, rev. 1990.)



## Historic Adventism

One of the charges frequently made by these private organizations is that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has apostatized and therefore is no longer worthy of support. "Apostasy" in this context refers to a departure from doctrines held by Seventh-day Adventists in their early days. In other words, the critics charge, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded on a Bible-based theology, but as time has gone by, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has surrendered some of these beliefs and now holds, in some aspects, a theology that is not biblical but one that mirrors that of the "fallen" Protestant churches.

To respond fairly to this charge, it is necessary to determine what constitutes "historic Adventism." If it can first be established *what* beliefs comprised Seventh-day Adventist doctrine in its beginnings, then it will be possible to determine if the Seventh-day Adventist Church has altered its position.

In the formative period of Adventism, the "landmarks" of the faith were few and straightforward. Although later years would witness controversies sparked by voices arguing for more structure and specificity, still, it was a simple covenant that bound Seventh-day Adventists together when the first local conference (Michigan) organized in 1861: "We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name of Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

In 1872 Seventh-day Adventists published an anonymous, nonbinding state-

ment of beliefs. The statement made no mention of those teachings deemed so important by *Our Firm Foundation*. In the introduction, the unnamed author (Uriah Smith) took great pains to emphasize the unofficial and non-creedal nature of the document:

"In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline aside from the Bible. We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is and has been, with great unanimity, held by them. We often find it necessary to meet inquiries on this subject, and sometimes to correct false statements circulated against us, and to remove erroneous impressions which have obtained with those who have not had an opportunity to become acquainted with our faith and practice. Our only object is to meet this necessity."<sup>5</sup>

The General Conference session of 1882 appointed a committee to prepare a church manual, suggesting that it first be published serially for discussion and criticism. As a result, 18 articles appeared in the *Review and Herald* from June 5 to October 9, 1883. The 1883 conference session voted against adoption, however, recognizing the cogency of the following report from the very committee appointed to prepare the manual:

"It is the unanimous judgment of the committee, that it would not be advisable to have a church manual. We consider it unnecessary because we have already surmounted the greatest diffi-



culties connected with church organization without one; and perfect harmony exists among us on this subject. It would seem to many like a step toward formation of a creed, or a discipline, other than the Bible, something we have always been opposed to as a denomination. If we had one, we fear many, especially those commencing to preach, would study it to obtain guidance in religious matters, rather than to seek it in the Bible, and from the leadings of the Spirit of God, which would tend to their hindrance in genuine religious experience and in knowledge of the mind of the Spirit. It was in taking similar steps that other bodies of Christians first began to lose their simplicity and became formal and spiritually lifeless. Why should we imitate them? The committee feels, in short, *that our tendency should be in the direction of simplicity and close conformity to the Bible, rather than in elaborately defining every point in church management and church ordinances.*"<sup>6</sup>

In 1889, when the issue of landmarks was being agitated by those who wanted a longer list, Ellen White described the experience of the remnant's formative years and summarized the landmarks even more concisely. The very point she was trying to get across was how *short* the list of landmarks actually was:

"The passing of the time in 1844 was a period of great events, opening to our astonished eyes the cleansing of the sanctuary transpiring in heaven, and having decided relation to God's people upon the earth, [also] the first and second angels' messages and the third, unfurling the banner on which was inscribed, 'The commandments of God

and the faith of Jesus.' One of the landmarks under this message was the temple of God, seen by His truth-loving people in heaven, and the ark containing the law of God. The light of the Sabbath of the fourth commandment flashed its strong rays in the pathway of the transgressors of God's law. The nonimmortality of the wicked is an old landmark. I can call to mind nothing more that can come under the head of the old landmarks."<sup>7</sup>

If an official statement of beliefs is to be adopted, the church has insisted that it should be discussed and voted on its own merits by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in session. That happened in 1980 when the church adopted its current statement of 27 fundamental beliefs (*Church Manual*, rev. 1990). In the tradition of the 1872 statement, a preamble appears with two noteworthy features: (1) an explicit reference to a creed ("Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed") and (2) mention of the possibility of later modification ("Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference [of Seventh-day Adventists] session when . . ."). The latter provision was designed to be a further safeguard against granting the statement the status of a creed in the classic sense.

The significant point here is: *Seventh-day Adventists have never "formally" adopted a position on the question of just how Jesus' nature compared with Adam's and with ours. Neither has the church ever "formally" adopted a position on perfection and the precise nature of human obedience.*

By contrast, all Seventh-day Adventists always have affirmed that God has called



His children to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. All Seventh-day Adventists always have affirmed the Sabbath and the blessed Advent hope. All Seventh-day Adventists always have affirmed that Jesus lived without sin, was our example, and died for our sins.

Under the umbrella of commitment to the basic doctrines of the faith, ministers and members hold a variety of views on such issues as the human nature of Christ and the relation of justification to sanctification as each attempts to understand and live out his or her personal relationship with God. While we may discuss our particular interpretations and even attempt to persuade others of their validity, we have no authority to demand that others see them exactly as we do or to label those who disagree with us as heretics or apostates.

The problem then is not that Hope International and Hartland Institute hold theological views that appear extreme or one-sided to many other Seventh-day Adventists. *The heart of the problem is their insistence that leaders, members, and ministers must agree with them or be charged with heresy and that viewpoints differing from theirs are an evidence of apostasy in the church.* This position leads to severe criticism of church leaders for either accepting theological views that differ from their own, or criticism for failing to restrain and discipline those who do hold such views.

Leaders at Hope International are aware that their positions are not represented in the 27 fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, but they consider this statement of faith to be too bland and open to interpretation to be authoritative.

"The official Seventh-day Adventist

statement of beliefs is couched in such a way that pivotal doctrines such as victorious Christian living, the nature of Christ, and the atonement are left sufficiently general that all but the most rabid New Theology teachers can give confident assent to them. Thus it is hard to take strong action against them."<sup>8</sup>

But that is exactly the point. The united church in session has deliberately chosen to leave some points open because general agreement on specifics does not exist. In attempting to insist that the church accept their views in order to be "purified," Hope International and Hartland Institute would, in effect, create a new standard of Adventism beyond what the Seventh-day Adventist Church has seen fit to adopt. But no members or leaders have a right to do that. The standard of Adventism must be a decision of the united Seventh-day Adventist Church in General Conference session.

Of course, Hope International/*Our Firm Foundation*, Hartland Institute, Prophecy Countdown, Steps to Life church in Wichita, Kansas, Rolling Hills congregation in Rolling Hills, Florida, Good News Unlimited, or any other group may believe that they are right and the church is wrong. That is their privilege. In that case they should attempt to persuade the church to restudy the matter and possibly change direction, or they could chose to withdraw from the church since they are not in basic harmony with it. But they do not have a right to insist what the church must be and to set themselves up as the standard that all must follow.



## A Church Within the Church?

Present evidence does not suggest that these private organizations or any other churches or groups associated with them, or other private organizations promoting similar divisive concepts, seek to break with the Seventh-day Adventist Church and establish their own denomination. But they are increasingly organizing their followers into a churchlike fellowship within but separate from the denomination. This might be called "a church within the church."

The idea seems to be that this little group is the "true remnant" in the midst of the larger group who have departed from the historic faith in both theology and practice. When the "shaking time" comes, the apostate majority will be shaken out, leaving behind the core of true followers who will be ready to meet Jesus because they have perfected their lives through His grace. They suggest that this true core is composed of those who have accepted the message of these private organizations and other similar voices of reform.

Notice some of the elements that suggest the "church within the church" concept.

**Authoritative Leadership.** The New Testament church followed leaders whom God had called and gifted (Acts 6:1-4; Eph. 4:11-13). Ron Spear, a leader of Hope International and editor of *Our Firm Foundation*, and Colin Standish, president of Hartland Institute, give every evidence of having achieved such leadership status among their followers. Robert Folkenberg, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, has far less authority and

credibility with this group than do Spear and Standish. The *Our Firm Foundation* converts look for spiritual guidance and doctrinal integrity to these two men rather than to their Seventh-day Adventist Church pastors and denominational leaders.

**Organization of Local Congregations.** The apostles in New Testament times raised up congregations as they traveled from place to place (Acts 14:21-25). In a few instances Hope International has organized its own local non-Seventh-day Adventist congregations. Examples are in Derby and Winfield, Kansas. In other cases followers of Hope International have attempted to join existing congregations in large enough numbers to gain control of the church. An example is Yelm, Washington.

**Camp Meetings.** Hope International and Hartland Institute hold meetings to which their followers are invited through the pages of *Our Firm Foundation* and other publications as well. The Hartland Institute newsletter of May 29, 1992, contains this invitation:

"PPS. Don't forget to plan on coming to the fifth annual Hartland old-fashioned family Bible camp meeting starting July 29 through August 2. Speakers include Joe Crews, Ron Spear, John Grosboll, Colin Standish, Hal Mayer, Ron Goss, Ray DeCarlo, and more. We are praying for the Holy Spirit to be here in abundance, we pray you will too."

These meetings often stand in competition with meetings conducted by the conferences of the denomination.

**Ordained Pastors.** Jesus ordained the twelve disciples for ministry (Mark 3:14). In order to protect the church



from "false prophets" (Matt. 7:15), Seventh-day Adventists have established certain qualifications for ordination to the gospel ministry (see *North American Division Working Policy*, L 45). Among these is approval of the candidate for ordination by the local and union conference committees.

Without such approval, Ralph Larson ordained three lay members as gospel ministers at a Steps to Life camp meeting held in Wichita, Kansas, on June 13, 1992. They were John Osborne, speaker for Prophecy Countdown, who had been disfellowshipped by the Florida Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on September 29, 1991; Robert Trefz, who was disfellowshipped by the Rapid City, South Dakota, Seventh-day Adventist Church, July 20, 1992; and Michael Thompson, a graduate of Hartland Institute.

Spear denies support for this ordination, but the stage was set and the climate created for the event by these private organizations. The camp meeting was sponsored by Steps to Life, an organization founded by the late Marshall Grosboll, a follower of Hope International and a contributor to *Our Firm Foundation*; the official conducting the ordination was a valued coworker of Spear and Standish—their theologian, as it were; and those ordained have been prominent speakers at the Hope International and Hartland Institute camp meetings and seminars.

In his ordination sermon Larson explained that true biblical ordination has always been a response to the call of God's people—in this case members of the Rolling Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church (John Osborne's Florida group), the Steps to Life Seventh-day Adventist

Church (John Grosboll's church in Wichita, Kansas), and a home church in South Dakota. Despite the titles, each of these are independent congregations—not part of the conference organizations.

Larson summed up his message saying:

"Let it be clearly understood that we are NOT doing this in the name of the Seventh-day Adventist organization, or by the authority of the Seventh-day Adventist organization. We are doing this by the scriptural authority of the priesthood of all believers and for the benefit of the needy historic Seventh-day Adventists."

Do they have a right to do this? Of course they do. We live in a land with freedom of religion. But this action clearly demonstrates an intention to operate a rival organization to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a "church within the church."

**Baptism of Converts.** The New Testament church was commissioned to make disciples and to baptize them into its fellowship (Matt. 28:18-20). In the Seventh-day Adventist Church baptism is administered only to those who have demonstrated a walk with Christ and who are accepted as members of a local congregation. Recently leaders of these private organizations have supported baptizing individuals by their own organizations. Thus again the competitive or rival nature of the movement can be discerned.

**Tithes and Offerings.** If members can be convinced that the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its leaders have apostatized, they may no longer wish to support it financially and may begin to return their tithe and offerings to other



ministries. *If these private organizations can convince members that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is no longer worthy of support because of apostasy and that members are not required to return their tithe to the Seventh-day Adventist Church (although they are biblically required to tithe), perhaps members will choose to support them.*

The groundwork for this shift in support is laid in an article by Ralph Larson, "The Tithe Problem—Who Is Responsible?"<sup>9</sup> Although a disclaimer in the introduction says that "it is not the purpose of this article to solicit funds, or to attempt to point out what one's personal responsibility is," the tone of the article soon belies this disclaimer. Notice some sample statements:

"Tithe should always be faithfully returned to the Lord, and all tithe should be used for the support of the ministry. But which ministry or what ministry? This is the question that is troubling us now. What if a ministry strays from the path of sacred duty? What if a ministry becomes so theologically confused as to depart from the truths of God's Word and begins preaching a false gospel? What if church leaders begin to use tithe funds for purposes other than the ministry of the Word, . . . even to pay the fees of non-Adventist lawyers? What, then, is our Christian duty?"

Larson answers the question by stating that "in neither [Ellen White's] writings nor her practice was there anything to support the view that all tithe, regardless of circumstances, must be paid through regular church channels." We should then ask, Are circumstances now such that members would be justified in re-

turning tithe through other than "regular church channels?" Here is Larson's statement:

"It would be difficult for any member of the North American Division to be unaware of the great theological apostasy which is at the very heart of the tithe problem. He or she is likely to encounter it in church on any Sabbath morning. . . .

"Can it be possible that there are ministers, teachers, and administrators all through our ranks who are under the control of Satan? If the writings of Ellen White are inspired, we have no choice but to believe it."

Having developed the scenario to this point, Larson pictures the dilemma of the faithful church member:

"As this heart-wrenching experience continues, the church member is eventually forced to recognize that Ellen White's predictions about the great Adventist apostasy are being fulfilled before his eyes. Then comes the agonizing question, 'Does God require me to pay my tithe to support the great apostasy?' . . .

"He then turns to an independent ministry holding the Seventh-day Adventist historic faith, preaching the message that he accepted when he joined the church. He now begins to send his tithe to that ministry. . . .

"Who is responsible? Has the church member's problem been created by the independent ministry, or by the preaching of the false doctrines of Calvinism in his own church?"

Regardless of the opening disclaimer, this is certainly an appeal to send tithe funds to independent ministries. The description of such a worthy ministry



leaves no doubt that the reference is to Hope International. It is not the purpose of this paper to prove that the tithe should be returned through regular organized channels according to both the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. Roger Coon of the E. G. White Estate has ably demonstrated that and revealed the conditions for exceptions in a major article: "Tithe: Ellen White's Counsel and Practice."<sup>10</sup> *Here our purpose is to show that Hope International does plead a case for the diversion of tithe funds into their ministry, and the case is predicated on the gross apostasy (according to their definition) in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.*

### **Admission of a Church Within the Church**

Evidence has been presented that Hope International, with support from certain other ministries, has been seeking to set up a rival or competitive church within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. How does it respond to this charge? A recent article in *Our Firm Foundation* addressed the reason independent ministries have arisen in the church:

"The one main underlying reason is that some of us want to see the third angel's message go forward. For years we have been stagnant. . . . One other reason these ministries have come into being is our present backsliding as a church, and issues involved with that backsliding. This sad state of affairs has caused an independent backlash. . . . Once again, Independent Ministries are a reaction to the direction in which the church, as a whole, has been heading for the last forty years."<sup>11</sup>

"It is quite evident that there are now *two churches under one church name*. To try to keep both sides satisfied will eventually cause the downfall of the whole denominational structure, spiritually and physically."<sup>12</sup>

In a later issue John Grosboll explains: "When I say independent, I mean independent from the control of the denomination."<sup>13</sup>

The heart of the problem between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and these private organizations is not their calling attention to the sins and failures of the church. No true Seventh-day Adventist—leader or laity—approves of the sins and failings that appear at times within the church body. *The real problem is that these dissident groups feel driven to charge the Seventh-day Adventist Church with being in a state of apostasy because it does not accept their views on certain debatable theological issues.* And the sins and failures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are seen as issuing out of this condition as well.

### **Hartland Institute**

Colin Standish, president of Hartland Institute, has joined with Ron Spear and his followers in their criticisms of the church. Because Hope International publishes *Our Firm Foundation*, it is easier to demonstrate its divisiveness than it is in the case of Hartland Institute. Nevertheless, some evidence is worth noting.

Recently, Outposts Centers International, a highly respected association of Seventh-day Adventist self-supporting institutions, found it necessary to expel Hartland Institute from its membership (Mar. 4, 5, 1992) because of its lack of



loyal support for the church. Then Adventist-Laymen's Services and Industries, the leading Seventh-day Adventist lay organization, also expelled Hartland Institute (Aug. 4, 1992) for the same reasons.

A few years ago Hartland Institute had a board of directors composed of a wide variety of prominent lay church leaders. That board officially made three demands of Hartland Institute administrators: 1. They were not to receive members' tithes. 2. They were not to associate with organizations that were in poor standing with the church. 3. They were not to conduct seminars in churches or communities where the local church or conference requested them not to work. Thus the Hartland Institute board encouraged cooperation with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, at the next Hartland Institute constituency meeting all those persons who supported these three points were removed from their board. Since then there has been little or no cooperation between Hartland Institute and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### Prophecy Countdown

Prophecy Countdown, a Florida-based, independent television organization, is led by John Osborne, who was formerly (and for a short period) an unordained pastor for the Florida Conference but who went independent in 1985.

Osborne has sought out certain alleged faults and failures in various church leaders and institutions and broadcast them widely through videotapes. Some of the accusations seem to be groundless. Others have a basis in fact, but they are blown out of propor-

tion in the telling. The key point, however, is Osborne's use of this material to turn Seventh-day Adventists against their church and to win support for himself.

Instead of following the counsel of Matthew 18 and seeking to correct the erring in a spirit of Christian concern and love, Osborne has been destructively critical of the body—broadcasting widely the alleged faults of pastors, teachers, and leaders, often without bothering even to check personally on the reliability of his information. He has apparently discovered that the more sensational his accusations, the easier it is to gain support from the disgruntled elements of the church.

John Osborne entered the ministry as a pastoral intern in the Florida Conference on September 1, 1980. During his tenure as pastor of the Naples and Bonita Springs churches he began a local television ministry. It seemed to go well, and a national or even an international ministry was envisioned. However, conference leadership felt that they did not have either the commission or the funds to support a major television ministry such as Osborne was contemplating. Osborne left the organized ministry on December 31, 1984, to continue his quest for a national television ministry before he qualified for ordination. He has not held a ministerial license or ministerial credential in the Florida Conference since that date.

On June 24, 1990, the Florida Conference executive committee voted to remove Osborne from the position of lay leader of the congregation at Prophecy Countdown (Rolling Hills, Florida); "Due to recent public activities by John Osborne that we feel do not correctly



represent the Florida Conference of Seventh-day Adventists or its employees, VOTED to withdraw the appointment of John Osborne as lay leader of the Rolling Hills company."<sup>14</sup>

When the membership of the Rolling Hills, Florida, company refused to accept the decision of the Florida Conference executive committee and all subsequent negotiations failed, the conference disbanded the company on November 29, 1990.

It was not until almost a year later that conference leadership began to deal with Osborne's membership. Prophecy Countdown continued to become more strident and irresponsible in its presentations on "celebration" and other issues. No change in direction was witnessed. The administrative committee of the Florida Conference (responsible for the day-to-day operations of the conference) on September 16, 1991, voted to recommend to the Florida Conference executive committee that Osborne's name be brought to the committee for discussion and possible action. When Osborne declined to appear, claiming that he was transferring to a new church home, the executive committee voted to drop his membership for reasons of apostasy on September 29, 1991.

The stated reason for the action taken by the executive committee is found in the *Church Manual* in the list of reasons for dropping a member for apostasy—reason 8: "Persistent refusal to recognize properly constituted church authority or to submit to the order and discipline of the church"<sup>15</sup> Osborne, however, was able to find a Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Troy, Montana, where he had no physical presence, that was will-

ing to accept him into membership by profession of faith (Oct. 12, 1991). This was done in spite of the objections of the Montana conference.

Through his widely circulated videotapes, Osborne continues to attack what he perceives to be the evidences of the church's apostasy. He changes the wording of Spirit of Prophecy statements to make them condemn present church leadership even though these statements were originally written in an entirely different context. Because a Spanish version of *The Great Controversy* was prepared for sale in Argentina that omitted certain anti-Catholic statements because of legal prohibitions in that country, Osborne has accused the church of a diabolical attempt to destroy this inspired book.

Some of his major attacks have been against Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher learning in North America. He has charged that a half dozen of our leading colleges use a textbook that promotes the New Age in a course required of all students. Actually, the book is about improving study skills, does not promote New Age thought, and is currently used at only one Seventh-day Adventist college in a nonrequired course. Osborne has also claimed that the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary located at Andrews University trains its pastoral candidates in celebration-type worship and in hypnotism. Both charges are blatantly false.

This brief document lacks the space to elaborate Osborne's charges against the church and to provide the evidence to refute them. This has been done in great detail, however, in the book *Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Cer-*



*tain Private Ministries* (available through your Adventist Book Center), of which this paper is a summary. The larger work contains, among other things, extensive minutes and correspondence relative to the issues being examined.

The counsel of Jesus in Matthew 18 will lead Christians to go in a spirit of love and concern to those whom they believe to be in error and to set the matter before them with the goal of winning them and restoring them. This counsel has been followed by church leaders with John Osborne. There has been no positive response by him.

In the light of Osborne's destructive attacks, church leadership saw no other course but to remove him from his pastoral position and finally from church membership. Loyal Seventh-day Adventists will not believe his accusations against their church but will check into the facts for themselves and will give the church the benefit of the doubt.

## Conclusion

At stake is the integrity of the church itself. God could have sent the angels of heaven to proclaim the message of salvation, or He could have written it across the sky, but in His infinite wisdom, He chose to use the Seventh-day Adventist Church to communicate His eternal plan to humankind. Ellen White explained:

"The church is the depository of the wealth of the riches of the grace of Christ, and through the church eventually will be made manifest the final and full display of the love of God to the world that is to be lightened with its glory."<sup>16</sup>

Since the Seventh-day Adventist

Church has fallible human beings as both leaders and members, it falls far short of perfection. But in spite of its faults, God loves it and continues to work through it to carry out His gracious plans for human beings. "The church, enfeebled and defective, needing to be reproofed, warned, and counseled, is the only object upon earth upon which Christ bestows His supreme regard."<sup>17</sup> When members notice weaknesses in the church, they should remember that the Laodicean church is the final manifestation of Christ's body and will become the church victorious.

These dissident organizations cause division in the church when they insist that their interpretations of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy are the only authentic ones. They set up their own version of "historic Adventism." They undermine confidence in the church when they accuse ministers and leaders who do not agree with them of "apostasy." They threaten the viability of the church when they encourage members to divert financial resources from the organized work to their private treasuries. Thus they sow seeds of disunity. While each Seventh-day Adventist must consult his or her own conscience in deciding what to do about their message, the church has produced this document that all might see the facts in their true light and have an adequate basis for making their decisions.

The private organizations mentioned in this paper present the most immediate concerns. But the principles stated herein are applicable on a much wider scale. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has had its detractors throughout its history, and it is likely to meet these chal-



lenges until the Lord comes. Hopefully the reader can use this material to understand and respond to any "reform" group that seeks to work by undermining leaders and dividing the membership.

At the beginning it was noted that this document has been prepared in a spirit of love and concern—not hostility or revenge. It seems fitting to end on a note of appeal to these groups.

## Appeal

*Dear Separated Brothers and Sisters:*

*Don't fight us. In the long run we all want the same thing—the finishing of the gospel proclamation, the return of Jesus, and a glorious eternity together with Him and each other. Preach and publish your call to a higher standard of holiness.*

*Explain your particular theological understandings, but allow other, equally sincere members to have their views also and still be counted your brothers and sisters in Christ. In other words, be tolerant on those points that the church has left open.*

*Never seek to destroy confidence in the ministry or leadership of the church, for that could cause "weaker" members to lose faith altogether and turn away from God's church. If you see wrongs in individuals, follow Christ's counsel in Matthew 18, but never publish the matter abroad. And never encourage members to bypass God's treasury and send their tithes to you, for this is not God's plan. Let's work together—in unity, but not necessarily in uniformity—to finish our mission. We love you.*

*Your Church*

## References

<sup>1</sup>This paper is a summary of a major book published by the North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, entitled *Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Certain Private Ministries*. The book presents voluminous evidence to answer the charges that certain of these private organizations have made against the church and its leaders—evidence that cannot be included in this paper because of space limitations. The book is available from the Adventist Book Centers.

<sup>2</sup>*Our Firm Foundation* 3, No. 9 (September 1988): 3. (Italics supplied.)

<sup>3</sup>Quotations following are from Ralph Larson, "Heresies Will Come In," *Our Firm Foundation* 6, No. 2 (February 1991): 16-20. (Italics supplied.)

<sup>4</sup>*Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1861; cited from M. E. Olsen, *The Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1925), p. 251; also cited in *SDA Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1976), p. 358.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted here from Appendix A of Gary Land, ed., *Adventism in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 231.

<sup>6</sup>*Review and Herald*, Nov. 20, 1883. (Italics supplied.)

<sup>7</sup>Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1946), pp. 30, 31.

<sup>8</sup>*Our Firm Foundation* 4, No. 6 (June 1989): 17.

<sup>9</sup>Quotations following are from *Our Firm Foundation* 6, No. 9 (September 1991): 20-24.

<sup>10</sup>*Adventist Review Supplement*, Nov. 7, 1991.

<sup>11</sup>Jeff Reich, "The Church and Special [Independent] Ministries," *Our Firm Foundation* 5, No. 3 (March 1990): 12, 13.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14. (Italics supplied.)

<sup>13</sup>John Grosboll, "Has God Ordained Independent Self-Supporting Work?" *Our Firm Foundation* 7, No. 2 (1992): 8.

<sup>14</sup>Florida Conference executive committee action 90-55.

<sup>15</sup>General Conference of SDAs, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, rev. 1990, p. 160.

<sup>16</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1944), p. 50.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.